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## A Jobber in His Shadow

Marco Sonzogni

*in memoriam Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)*

Ἀρχόμενος σέο Φοῖβε παλαιγενέων κλέα φωτῶν  
μνήσομαι οἱ Πόντοιο κατὰ στόμα καὶ διὰ πέτρας  
Κυανέας βασιλῆος ἐφημοσύνη Πελῖαιο  
χρύσειον μετὰ κῶας ἐύζυγον ἤλασαν Ἀργώ

Ἀπολλώνιος Ῥόδιος, *Ἀργοναυτικά* (I 1-4)\*

Believe that a farther shore  
Is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
And cures and healing wells.

Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy* (Chorus)

The Swedish Academy awarded Seamus Heaney the Nobel Prize in Literature “for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past”. This memory of the past coming alive again in “that one moment” where the ordinary and the extraordinary meet, also occurs in Dante’s *Comedy*—an experience painfully retrieved from forgetfulness:

Un punto solo mi è maggior letargo  
che venticinque secoli a la ’mpresa  
che fé Nettuno ammirar l’ombra d’Argo.

Così la mente mia, tutta sospesa,  
mirava fissa, immobile e attenta,  
e sempre di mirar faceasi accesa.

(*Par XXXIII* 94-99)\*\*

As Dante strives to recall the temporal distance (“maggior letargo”) between a vision and its memory by writing about it, more than the twenty centuries seems to have elapsed since the Argonauts and their ship, the Argo, ‘observed with wonder’ (“ammirar”) by Neptune, the God of the sea.

These *terzine* have three themes: first, the noun “letargo”, from the Greek *lèthargos*, which literally means ‘slow oblivion’, ‘forgetfulness’, ‘lethargy’—the “deep and continuous sleep a

sick person is forcedly awakened from and, when asked questions, either does not reply or replies slowly or has no memory of the past” (*Dizionario etimologico italiano*). It also means ‘hibernation’, from the Latin *hibernatio*, “the action of passing the winter” (from the past participle stem of *hibernare* “to winter, pass the winter”). Secondly, the verbs “mirar” and “ammirar”, from the Latin *mirari*, ‘to wonder at’, ‘to marvel’, ‘to be astonished’, an amazed acknowledgment of something out-of-ordinary as ordinary. Third, in their search for the Golden Fleece, Jason and his crew of Argonauts make their first stop on the island of Lemnos—a place of divine and human affairs, of hopes and agonies, of desires fulfilled and frustrated.

There is a Seamus Heaney poem where these three elements come together in a vision both earth-bound and heaven-bound, poised between the real and the imagined:

The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise  
were all at prayers inside the oratory  
a ship appeared above them in the air.

The anchor dragged along behind so deep  
it hooked itself into the altar rails  
and then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,

a crewman shinned and grappled down the rope  
and struggled to release it. But in vain.  
‘This man can’t bear our life here and will drown,’

the abbot said, ‘unless we help him.’ So  
they did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back  
out of the marvellous as he had known it.

(from ‘Squarings’: Lightings, viii; *Seeing Things*, 1991)

The Swedish Academy singled out this poem as “a crystallisation of much of Heaney’s imaginative world: history and sensuality, myths and the day-to-day”. Within such an imaginative world, I feel emboldened to re-think the abbot as Neptune, and the crewman as one of the Argonauts voyaging with Jason, Argo now sailing Irish air instead of Aegean water in order to see and be seen...

Commenting on ‘Had I Not Been Awake’—the text opening his last collection, *Human Chain* (2010)—Heaney states that the poem “is about a mighty wind that brings the poet alive to an ‘it’ which is unspecified yet is something brought out of the ordinary into the marvellous, or perhaps out the marvellous into the ordinary”, concluding that “one way or another, each poem hunts for an ‘it’ that is both elusive and revealing.”

This commentary can also be used to describe the translator of poetry, the translator who shares the journey toward the elusive and the revealing, as he too strives to see things only to discover that his mind—which Dante referred to as *the ship of intelligence and imagination* (*Pur I 2*: “*la navicella del mio ingegno*”)—is ill-adapted for sailing and seeing.

Over the last twenty years I have often felt this inadequacy when translating Heaney's poetry—a clandestine passenger aboard the vessel of his art; a sacrilegious witness of his miracles; a helpless servant boy wintering out, trailing behind a merciful master. At the same time, no reading of a text is closer than the process of translating it and so providing an afterlife to an author and his work, as Walter Benjamin has put it.

The short time since Heaney's death already feels unbearably long—"every day", in the words of his *Philoctetes*, "a weeping wound"—so I shall remember him with a translation, a jobber in his shadow swinging a battered hurricane-lamp:

### Servant Boy

He is wintering out  
the back-end of a bad year,  
swinging a hurricane-lamp  
through some outhouse,

a jobber among shadows.  
Old work-whore, slaveblood,  
who stepped fair-hills  
under each bidder's eye

and kept your patience  
and your counsel, how  
you draw me into  
your trail. Your trail

broken from haggard to stable,  
a straggle of fodder  
stiffened on snow,  
comes first-footing

the back doors of the little  
barons: resentful  
and impenitent,  
carrying the warm eggs.

*(Wintering Out, 1972)*

### Ragazzo servo

Dura l'inverno  
che chiude un brutto anno,  
dondolando una lanterna antivento

mentre attraversa un fienile,  
  
un bracciante tra le ombre.  
Vecchia prostituta da lavoro, sangue  
di schiavo, che percorrevi le fiere di bestiame  
sotto l'occhio di ogni offerente  
  
e restavi paziente  
e silenzioso, come  
mi attiri sulle  
tue tracce. Tracce  
  
discontinue dall'aia alla stalla,  
una scia di foraggio  
indurito nella neve,  
che giungono per prime  
  
alla porta di servizio dei piccoli  
baroni: risentito  
e impenitente,  
con in mano le uova fresche.

*(Traversare l'inverno, 1972)*

\* In R.C. Seaton's translation:

Beginning with thee, O Phoebus, I will recount the famous deeds of men of old, who, at  
the behest of King Pelias, down through the mouth of Pontus and between the Cyanean  
rocks, sped well-benched Argo in quest of the golden fleece.

\*\* In Allen Mandelbaum's translation:

That one moment  
  
brings more forgetfulness to me than twenty-  
five centuries have brought to the endeavour  
that startled Neptune with the Argo's shadow!  
  
So was my mind-completely rapt, intent,  
steadfast, and motionless-gazing; and it  
grew ever more enkindled as it watched.



Ercole de' Roberti (1450-1496)  
*Viaggio degli Argonauti*